

ORGAN TRANSPLANTS: WAITING FOR THE CALL

For families, organ donations give meaning to death

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Kristen Norris turned her head to avoid looking at the needle in her mother's arm.

The 13-year-old patted her mother's shoulder and said, "That's a nice thing you're doing, Mom."

Later that night at the dinner table, Kristen and her mother, Annie, discussed donating blood, something Annie did frequently in the company of her daughter. The topic then shifted to organ donation.

"Her response was that she wouldn't need her organs after she was gone, so someone else should benefit from them," Annie said. "We never thought we'd actually have to implement her wishes."

A week later, on April 21, 1996, Kristen died from anaphylaxis after an allergic reaction to walnuts.

Unlike most organ donor cases, where medical staffers approach survivors about donations, this time it was the mother who took action first. When she learned her daughter would not survive, Annie approached the medical staff about donating Kristen's organs.



Kristen Norris

The decision that she and her husband Richard made is perhaps one of the hardest for parents. While the Reno couple continue to mourn their daughter's death, they take comfort in knowing Kristen's organs helped save lives.

Kristen's liver saved a 50-year-old man infected with hepatitis C, her left kidney and pancreas saved a 30-year-old gospel singer from Oakland and her right kidney saved an 8-year-old boy, whose twin brother received their father's kidney in a separate life-saving operation.

It was a choice Kristen would have made herself, her mom said.

"In some ways, donation is like spitting in the face of death," Annie said. "It's a way of saying, 'You may have taken her from me, but you can't have all of her.' She still lives in someone else. It's that one last act of defiance."

"It's so bloody unfair to be a mom one minute and the next ...what?" she said.

"Not only did her life have meaning, but her death had meaning as well," she said. "Think about organ donation. You never know what's going to happen tomorrow or this afternoon. You hope you never have to deal with it, but if it happens you and those you love will be prepared."

'A selfless thing'

Beverly McQueen and a friend were enjoying a margarita at a Sparks casino in July when McQueen had a thought.



"I wish I could be there when they get that call," she said. "They are finally going to get what they've been needing."

Beverly was referring to the transplant candidates who would be notified that they would be getting her boyfriend's organs.

Glenn Watson died in July of a brain aneurism. McQueen said her long-term boyfriend was not a registered organ donor.

HANDOUT
Glenn Watson

"A weight was lifted off my shoulders," the Sun Valley woman said of her decision to donate his organs. "It was an amazing load off my mind to know his life was not in vain and someone could benefit from this death."

"Someone really got his heart, someone really got his liver," she said. "I know this saved a lot of families from a lot of pain."

When hospital officials told Beverly that Glenn was brain-dead they asked her if he would have been interested in donating his organs. His organs went to recipients in the San Francisco Bay area.

"I said 'yes;' I just knew it," she said. "It was natural and the right thing to do. I realized this was really happening (his death) and donating his organs could really help someone."

"It was a blessing and I'm proud of it," she said of her decision to donate his organs. Five of his organs were successfully transplanted into other patients, she said.

Last week, she received a letter from a woman who received one of Watson's kidneys. She said she was excited to get the letter and is writing back to the woman.

"It was a good experience even though I was facing a nightmare," she said. "It helps people and it's one of the most selfless things anyone can do."

Our son lives on

Quynn Hooper was a lively 16-year-old who loved to hunt with his father, played sports and enjoyed being a big brother to his two younger ones. Quynn also had a lot of friends and was a talented writer and poet.



HANDOUT

Quynn Hooper

But on Aug. 14, a 15-year-old acquaintance playing with a gun shot Quynn in the head. He died at a hospital a few hours later.

"We know our son still lives on," said his father, Bryan Hooper, of why he donated his son's organs.

According to a letter from the California Transplant Network, which coordinates organ donations in the region, Quynn's kidneys were implanted into a 42-year-old Northern California father of a baby girl, and a 39-year-old Texan, a father of two.

Quynn's liver was used for two people: a 7-month-old Oregon girl and a 52-year-old Oregon man, who is the father of three sons, the letter said. His heart and lungs were transplanted into a 25-year-old Northern California man.

"We are so proud that even in death, his life affected so many people," Quynn's dad said. "It has given us the hope that in time we will again see him in the eyes of one of the recipients of his organs."

A Washoe Family Court judge on Friday began reviewing the 15-year-old boy's case and will decide if he should be certified as an adult to face an involuntary manslaughter charge related to Quynn's death. Since their son's organ donation, the Hooper family of Sparks wears green bracelets that symbolize the "Gift of Life." Bryan said the bracelets display the affection his family has for their deceased son and for those who received Quynn's organs.

"Daily, we look at his picture, look at our wrists and continue to search for the justice his tragedy demanded," Bryan said. "Knowing others will carry on leads us to believe his spirit will walk the Earth as long as they breathe, which will last longer than our own lives."

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Quynn's mom, Nikki Hooper, is a registered organ donor.

"Donating organs is the best way to allow someone else to enjoy life after I'm gone," she said. "I don't need them anymore."

Bryan said that it's likely one of the recipients will have children, and some of his son's blood will pass through them.

"He will be remembered for eternity," he said. "And in such a tragedy, this is the bright light and ray of hope that drives us to continue with our other children and ourselves in our daily rigors and routines."